THE HOUSE OF GOD: THE GATE OF HEAVEN

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A Sermon

PREACHED AT THE CONSECRATION OF ST. MARY'S CHURCH, AND THE COMPLETION OF ITS NEW ALTAR, WEST PHILADELPHIA, PA., MAY 31, 1890,

BY

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TO all present, this first service in a building now consecrated to the worship of the Triune God, is an occasion of deepest interest and greatest joy.

"I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord." Such entrance into such a place is always the theme of reverent thanksgiving.

Chiefly to you, who henceforth will regard this building as your spiritual home, is to-day a day of gladness. To those, too, who worship regularly elsewhere, but who, in a spirit of fraternal sympathy or neighborly regard, have come to join in prayer and praise, this is a time of happiness. Even to the stranger, who may have wandered in here from mere motives of curiosity, the contagion of joy has given a delight, and songs of praise have inspired bliss.

The formal setting apart of this building by proper ecclesiastical authority, thus dedicating it exclusively

to solemn functions and sacred uses, gives to a place already hallowed by many holy associations an added sanctity. In a sense that this was not hitherto, it is henceforth to be "the house of God," "the gate of heaven." Henceforth may nothing unhallowed be allowed within these walls!

It seems to me that no words can better interpret for you the significance of this occasion, nor can any at this time be more helpful to you in every way, than those which will briefly declare the purpose for which a house of God is builded. Our conception of any place set apart for religious services, in which ministers baptize, preach, pray, and where duly authorized officials consecrate the elements of bread and wine, that they may become the body and blood of Christ, is that of the patriarch Jacob, who, seeing in a dream a ladder set up on earth, and reaching up to the sky, and on it angels ascending and descending, was so impressed by the sanctity of the spot, and the reality of the divine presence, that he exclaimed on awaking, "This is none other than the House of God, this is the gate of heaven!"

This conception arises out of the claims of Christianity to be a truth, a worship, a life. Christianity as a truth, a worship, a life, finds expression in a church that teaches the truth, provides the means of worship, and imparts the life. The church building is simply the visible embodiment of the church idea. It is therefore a place of instruction, a school

where divine truths are taught; it is a temple where divine worship is paid; it is a home where divine life is begun, continued, and nourished into life eternal.

The idea of a church, conceived in its general form, is the widening and strengthening of life by deepening the sense of brotherhood. Conceived in the Christian sense, the idea is the imparting a divine life and the strengthening of that life into the brotherhood of Jesus Christ. The Christian church stands for a definite idea. The church as a building, therefore, must represent this idea. The idea, to express it briefly, is that the highest knowledge of God and human life is the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and to embody his life and attest his teaching the church exists. Such a conception of the church of Christ implies that the church as a consecrated building should be: 1, a school; 2, a temple; 3, a home — a place of instruction, a place of worship, a place of comfort; a house of learning, a house of prayer, a house of rest. Such is a house of God.

And such a house differs, surely, from all other houses about it. It stands for principles which they do not represent. It becomes the monument of an idea. It is the embodiment of a faith. The very building itself is, in a sense, holy, because inanimate things blessed to sacred uses thereby become sacred. By virtue of consecration this church is holy, and because it is holy all its work must be holy. In no

sense is it to be worldly. Its first pretension forbids this. Its reason for being is that though in this world, it is not of this world. It is an educating force, but it educates along higher planes than those of earthly wisdom. It has a powerful strength in a community, but this strength is moral and spiritual; moral because spiritual. Here you have the right to seek the spirit of wisdom and understanding, but it is wisdom, not as the world comprehends it, understanding higher than that ever compassed by thoughts of men. This is a school in a very real sense, yet it is not the lecture hall or academic room, where students sit at scholars' feet to learn enticing words of human wisdom. The themes befitting this sacred place are the more lofty and awful ones of God, the soul, the duties of life, the way to die, the prospects of eternity. In this divine school the truths of God are to be taught by ambassadors of God. And though at different times the truths may be restated in language of the day, by phrases more in keeping with current thought, the truths taught here must be always the same. Anything more popular than this, more worldly in conception, more after the *gnosis* of the day, more in accord with the spirit which in other realms of study accords ready credence to anything that is new, must be sought elsewhere, where such things, such thoughts, such methods belong. They have no place in the house of God. In this holy temple, before this holy altar,

inspired by this divine presence, all things must be done to foreshadow the eternal, to lead men to see into the hidden mysteries, to urge them to put their trust in things more substantial than the things of the passing hour, to give them a measure of the seraphic vision of Isaiah, to bring them on their knees before their God, and to keep them there, until they arise with this one question on their lips, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" This is the wisdom taught in the church, the divine nursery, school, and university of instruction. This is the wisdom which here you shall be able to learn, dear brethren, if only like faithful scholars you will be attentive to the teaching. Let it be clearly understood that "this house is God's house" in this community, in the which, in a very real sense, "it pleaseth him to dwell." He dwells here as an instructor, as life-giver, as comforter. Because he thus dwells here, let reverence mark your deportment here. "Holiness becometh God's house forever." "Put off your shoes from your feet; the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." Be reverent, be worshipful, be attentive. Here, by divine arrangement and sanction, you mortal men can come and secure a full knowledge of your Creator, get a clear view of your Saviour, and from his lips learn about that sorrowful mystery, a sinful heart, and that munificent gift, a full redemption. Here, as to a school, dear friends, remember this,

here you can come and find your Saviour, who, if you will but listen, will teach you how to live, how to pray, how to work, and how to die. Better than all, he will give you his Spirit to help you do these things.

"To know God and his Son, Jesus Christ, is eternal life." The place to learn is the divine school, the house of God. If it is not the only place, it certainly is the best place to learn this knowledge, since it is God's appointed place.

The wisest and wealthiest of this world's rulers did the best thing of his life when he built a church, and worshipped in it. It was he who said, "Wisdom is better than rubies, and all riches." The wisdom he referred to is the knowledge of God, because he said, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Of the man, therefore, who deliberately remains away from this divine school, where this divine wisdom is taught, one surely has the right to quote Scripture, and say, "So is the fool that heapeth up treasure to himself, and is not rich towards God."

But again, the house of God is not only a school, a place of divine instruction, it is also a temple, a place of holy worship. This is very important, so important that it marks a church as a different building from any other. In every church that is completely furnished there must be an altar. Worship is a duty. God is pleased with our offerings of prayer and praise. By these we show God, in the very best way we can show God, that we love him.

Worship is of two kinds, private and public. The one cannot take the place of the other. There is an especial blessing upon the "two or three gathered together in his name," greater in kind, and in degree, than that bestowed upon the individual in secluded devotion. "In every place," God has promised, "where I record my name, I will come unto thee. I will bless thee." There is an especial presence vouchsafed at the altar, at the time of offering the holy sacrifice, and prayers offered before the altar, at such a time, have greatest efficacy.

"The hearts" of the two disciples traveling toward Emmaus "burned within them by the way," as the Saviour "taught them the Holy Scriptures," but the Saviour was not fully revealed until he was "made known to them" in Emmaus, in the house, at the sacrament, "in the breaking of the bread."

We cannot live spiritual lives, we cannot get near to Christ, unless we press through the crowd, and get to the nearer presence, where we can do something that corresponds to the "touching the hem of the garment," and so secure some of that virtue that the Saviour perceives goes out from him, when faithful ones so touch him. To do this best, we need to go often, go regularly, to the house of God, and there at the altar worship. If our earthly houses answer for wants of the body, surely God's own appointed house will minister abundantly to every want of the soul. He who erects his own house, and lavishes upon it

all his means can afford, doeth well. He, who gives for the building and adornment of the house of God, doeth better. We, who pretend that we are creatures of eternity, and lay some claim to citizenship in heaven, ought never to be satisfied, even from a selfish standpoint of consideration, until we have provided as liberally for our souls as for our bodies. The house of God is the provision for our souls, and its highest function is worship. All other purposes to which this place shall be put ought to be made subsidiary to this eminent prerogative, divine worship.

I would not detract any thing from the influence of sacred learning, or art. I am not at all in sympathy with puritanism, or baldness of any kind in public service, yet, when I think of the chief function of God's house, all accessories become subordinate to the things without which there can be no true worship, namely, the devout heart and the humble spirit.

Let those of us who advocate always the use of proper means to secure lawful ends never fail to insist upon the essentials of true worship. Since "God is a spirit," "they who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."

Angels perform the function of worship in the highest heavens. Spirits of just men made perfect perform the same in Paradise. We are expected to perform this function on earth.

This building itself, in this community, is a silent, yet a living witness to the fact that creatures of God

to do their duty must pay reverent worship to their Creator. Worship here must be preëminent. Instruction either from lectern or pulpit is secondary. Preaching has its place here, and its place is important, but worship is more so. I have no sympathy whatever with some modern sons, who think they do well in depreciating the power and influence of the pulpit. I have observed that with most foolish men the foolishness of preaching is least esteemed. Scriptures plainly teach that souls are reached and influenced for salvation by preaching. There is no way for men ever to hear the Gospel unless the Gospel be preached to them. "How shall they hear without a preacher." I cannot believe that men have ever been converted from evil to godliness by any other means than the influence of God's spirit acting through the agency of living men. But I read nowhere of a soul saved wholly by preaching. Something else follows preaching, that is in itself much more important than preaching. It is really the function of preaching to lead souls to this something else.

Our blessed Lord commissioned his apostles to "go and preach," but he did not stop there. He also said, "baptize them," and almost the last thing he said, was, "Do this in remembrance of me." A church is incomplete without a pulpit. A priest is very poorly equipped for his work if he cannot preach, and, in my judgment, he sins if he does not preach. To suppose that any of the accessories of music, vestments,

decorations, high ritual, can take the place of, or supersede the necessity for fervent preaching of the Gospel, is a frivolous and foolish conceit. Notwithstanding, we declare that the church is not eminently the place for preaching, but is preëminently the place for worship. Worship is the chief function of the house of God. The altar ought always to be more prominent than the pulpit. The sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, giving us the real presence of our adorable Saviour among the faithful gathered together in his name, is much more effectual in the salvation of a soul than any sacrament of talk.

The offering of the unbloody sacrifice, to be the propitiation for the sins of the world, will do more to save souls of sinners, and comfort the souls of saints, than any amount of the most eloquent preaching of men, or even of angels. Let us not forget, important as preaching is, and preaching is important, very important, that its chief value lies in its inducing men to approach the altar. That to-day we have consecrated an altar, and used it as such, is our sanction for claiming that "this is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven." Here God vouchsafes to be present, and to bless. Here "let all the people worship him."

But yet again, and finally, the church is a place of comfort. It is Bethesda as well as Bethel. It is a home, as well as a school and a temple.

You hardly need me to tell you how this is so. The great apostle has something to say about a divine arrangement whereby we can "comfort others with that comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God." Assuredly, dear brethren, nowhere else can we go with the certainty of securing this heavenly comfort, either for ourselves or through ourselves to dispense to others, as to the house of God. It is also the gate of heaven. Take your own lives, and out of the abundance of your heart let your own mouths speak! Around what spot center your holiest thoughts? Where in this world have you experienced your sublimest aspirations? To what place cling your tenderest associations? As life wears on one often in mind, and sometimes in body, goes back with such joy to holiest places, to renew, so to speak, the bliss that cannot otherwise be reproduced. There is the old town with its shady avenues, its extended vistas, the expanse of prairie, meadow, or water, the fruitful valleys, the overhanging hills; then there is the old school, with all its awakened memories, faces of dear ones long since gone from us; and dearer than these there is the old house, every line and angle, nook and corner, picture and chair of which is now so precious; but there is the old church, the sacredest, dearest of all. Here life's holiest associations cluster. Somebody has told you the very spot, where, as a baby, you were signed with the sacred symbol. You readily recall when your little

feet turned hitherward for prayer, instruction, and praise. The services and sermons, the very incidents and texts of some of which after passing years you quickly recall, the holy site in which you took an oath and the bishop gave you a blessing, the solemn hours of sacrifice-pleading and grace-receiving sacrament, your seasons of repentance or other sorrow, your hours of gladness and joy, your confidential talks with your Saviour about things you could not talk with man, your plighted vows to one as dear to you as life, the slow tread in and out of the sacred courts, with which you followed the remains of your dead, is n't it so? is not the church, the sanctuary, the holiest place on earth? "This is the house of God, this is the gate of heaven." Here, comfort that is comfort, lasting and plentiful, is freely dispensed. Here may the doubter find his doubts dissolved. Here may the penitent find forgiveness. Here may the afflicted discover the solace. Here the weary sees his weariness wearing away, the heavy-ladened observes his burdens disappear. Here the tired soul finds rest, rest in the Lord. The tangled doubts, the heavy cares, the wearied minds, the jaded bodies, the crushed hearts, the afflicted souls, all can find in this place the solvent and the cure.

Such is the house of God — a school, a temple, a home. Such may it be to you and your children, and to all who shall come after you!

To-day marks an epoch in your parish history.

After years of effort, you are privileged to stand to-day by the side of a monument reared, and to exclaim: "Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped us." Be it yours also to hear the voice of your Master commanding, "Go forward"; and going on to better, greater things for God, and the glory of his church, take for your comfort this divine assurance, "Jehovah Jireh," your Lord will provide.

With your old and honored leader for counsel; your young and highly esteemed pastor for action; your enviable body of faithful men and women, whose experience, for the most part, is of that best sort, that which results from being brought to a wealthy place after traveling through fire and water; with the traditions of loyalty and activity, marked characteristics of this time-honored parish, a magnificent opportunity is before you. God give you to-day abundant entrance, and all along the way, his richest blessings!